

Who Peticipates? Proponents of Parliamentary Citizens' Initiatives and Petitions in Austrian Parliament

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Very first draft based on a preliminary data analysis, please do not quote or circulate!

Abstract:

Petitions and Parliamentary Citizens' Initiatives (PCIs) received increasing academic attention in the recent past, because they are seen as a potential remedy against public dissatisfaction with representative forms of democracy. On the example of Austria and covering a full inventory of all PCIs submitted to the lower house of Austrian parliament from 2011 to 2017 (n=441), we provide an analysis of the political background of PCI proponents and their propositions. Differentiating between established political actors vs. civil society actors and active vs. reactive proposals, the paper shows that established political actors as well as civil society actors make use of PCIs, but with different objectives: Established political actors – such as local politicians and corporatist organizations – primarily propose reactive PCIs, raising critique on the government and aiming to maintain the status quo in a policy area. On the other hand, civil society actors at times use PCIs to bring in new issues, which were not covered by political parties at the time. The findings suggest that some aspirations – concerning new actors and issues – to PCIs as instrument of direct participation are misguided: Petitions and at times also Citizens' Initiatives are increasingly dominated by established actors and an opposition vs. government rationale. Nonetheless, PCIs serve as an instrument for MPs to transmit local concerns in their electoral districts into parliament. Therefore, PCIs can strengthen the interaction of citizens and politicians, providing a linkage of direct participation and representative politics. The paper contributes to research on social movements and their relation to party politics.

Keywords:

Petition, citizens' initiative, participation, members of parliament, social movements, Austrian politics;

1. Introduction

At a time when established modes of representation and decision making dominated by few parties and corporatist institutions lost public support, most European states introduced new instruments of direct participation, commonly labelled as democratic innovations. As such, the petitions system in Austrian parliament was reformed in 1988, raising expectations of increasing citizen participation aside from elections, giving a voice to civil society interests, and therefore strengthening trust in the political system. Yet, 30 years later, little is known about the proponents of Parliamentary Citizens' Initiatives and Petitions (PCIs), their concrete proposals and consequently about the role of PCIs in the political system of Austria. In this paper, we build on this research gap in order to provide insights on the role of PCIs in the intersection between representative and direct democracy.

Because existing research gives an unsatisfying account of the *who* and *what* of PCIs, we place a focus on the proponents of PCIs and the themes they address. In our view, it is necessary to empirically evaluate which actors make use of new modes of participation and what these actors aim to achieve by using PCIs before being able to assess the democratic potentials of such instruments. By collecting information on actors and contents of a total of 1271 PCIs submitted to the lower chamber of Austrian parliament from 1988 to 2017¹, we are able to examine to which extent new actors and issues entered Austrian politics via PCIs, or whether it are rather established actors extending their mobilisation efforts by using PCIs.

The petitions system of Austrian parliament is rather exclusive in terms of submitting PCIs (500 signatures of support for a Citizens' Initiative and one supporting MP for Petitions), but offers a distinct parliamentary committee for processing submitted PCIs and therefore is institutionally designed to dedicate successful PCIs in-depth deliberation in parliament (Parlament 2015). It thus constitutes an interesting case to study the actors making (successfully) use of this system, how Petitions and Citizens' Initiatives differ in this regard, and what the propositions of PCI proponents are about.

In the next section, we examine the current literature on PCIs and related instruments and develop hypotheses guiding our research, followed by a discussion of data and methods in section 3. Section 4 provides a descriptive analysis of the themes of PCIs and the involved actors, followed by a discussion of the main findings (section 5).

¹ As the coding process is still ongoing (as of August 2018), the analysis builds on 441 PCIs submitted 2011-2017.

Note on terminology: We use the abbreviation "PCIs" as an overall term for petitions and parliamentary citizens' initiatives. If we focus only on petitions or parliamentary citizens' initiatives, we use the terms "petition" and "citizens' initiative".

2. Theory and hypotheses

Parliamentary petitions are a long established instrument for citizens to communicate their views to those in power. Historically, petitions precede parliaments and democracy as known today, and may in the example of the UK date back to the 13th century (Judge 1978: 391). The functions of petitions have experienced several changes since then, but essentially include a means for individual grievance and a means for initiating policy change. In this view, they are an essential complementary to elections and judicial processes. Furthermore, already Leys (1955) shows on the example of petitions in the UK House of Commons that petitions were submitted by MPs to control the agenda of the house (because petitions were discussed at the beginning of a session) and therefore used petitions as a strategic tool for opposition politics. Starting from these historical perspectives, the use of parliamentary petitions is worth an empirical examination in terms of the issues and actors involved in petitioning: Who is using Petitions and Parliamentary Citizens' Initiatives (PCIs), and which issues are addressed?

While there have been considerable efforts to investigate the use of parliamentary petition systems in several countries in the past (Bochel 2013; Hough 2012; Judge 1978; Jungherr and Jürgens 2010; Korinek 1977; Leys 1955; Lindner and Riehm 2011; Miller 2009; Riehm *et al.* 2013), there are two essential shortcomings of existing scholarship which are addressed in this paper: (a) PCIs as tools for individuals vs. organised interests and (b) a systematic view on the themes of PCIs.

- (a) First, much current scholarship rests on an assumption that it are *individual citizens* who are the proponents of petitions and not somehow organised interest groups, such as NGOs, political parties, or other political actors (Riehm *et al.* 2013; Lindner and Riehm 2011; Halpin *et al.* 2018). On the other hand, social movement literature (e.g. Voss 2014) understand petitions as a conventional repertoire of NGOs and Grassroots to voice their concerns, and therefore as tools of *organised interests*. Furthermore, as Leys (1955) shows, petitions were used in the UK House of Commons by MPs on behalf of political parties (of the opposition) and therefore also to represent organised interests. In a nutshell, this paper aims to shed light on the organisational background of proponents of PCIs, distinguishing particularly between political elites, NGOs/Grassroots and individual citizens.
- (b) Second, the themes of PCIs merit attention. While existing scholarship usually shows a brief summary of the themes most commonly addressed in the analysed petitions (Miller 2009; Riehm *et al.* 2013; Jungherr and Jürgens 2010), a theoretical discussion of why some issues are addressed by PCIs (or other petitions) and which issues are not (or which issues are rather addressed with other instruments) are largely unclear. As such, we differentiate whether PCIs raise issues of local,

regional or national relevance (Halpin *et al.* 2018), whether they are directed toward legislative or executive actors and whether they bring in new issues or rather aim to maintain the status quo.²

Institutional design of PCIs in Austrian parliament

The Austrian petitions system dates back to the constitution of 1867, in which article 11 proclaims that “everyone has the right to petition”.³ This right was specified in 1975 insofar, as the right to submit Petitions is available only to Members of Parliament (MPs): Citizens may contact MPs with their petition, but it is the MP who submits it. These Petitions need to be related to issues for which the federal level of the Austrian political system is competent either in terms of legislation or executive action. In this sense, Petitions are devoted to general, collective concerns and not to individual concerns or grievance, for which the *Volksanwaltschaft* (ombudsman) was introduced in 1977 (Korinek 1977). In 1988, this petitions system was substantially amended, responding to claims for more opportunities for citizens to participate in federal politics. The reform brought a new instrument, Citizens’ Initiatives, which can be submitted directly by a citizen himself/herself, if 500 signatures of support are provided. Furthermore, there is a distinct parliamentary committee in which Petitions and Citizens’ Initiatives (PCIs) are discussed. This committee may collect statements on the issue from other institutions, hold hearings, and forward the PCI to another committee specialised in the respective policy area. However, although PCIs need to be processed by the committee per se, the committee may also simply acknowledge a PCIs and not take further action. After the PCI was given deliberation in the committee, a report of the incoming PCIs in the plenary provides an opportunity for all MPs to discuss the PCI in the plenary publicly. Importantly, these PCIs do not need to have a specific format and cannot be submitted online. However, since 2011 it is possible for every citizen in voting age to support PCIs online on the parliament’s website after the PCI was submitted and until it is forwarded from the PCI committee to another committee or the plenary (Zögernitz 1989; Staudinger 1989; Parlament 2015).

In comparison, the Austrian PCIs are rather exclusionary, since submissions cannot be made online and either a MP or 500 citizens need to support the PCI for submitting it to parliament (Riehm *et al.* 2013). On the other hand, the PCI committee has a bundle of opportunities in processing PCIs; Thus, once the hurdle of submission was passed, the PCI can get considerable attention.

² Since PCIs are institutionally designed to address the lower chamber of Austrian Parliament, it may be plausible to expect mostly PCIs which raise national issues and address parliament. As will be shown below, in practice this is far from always the case.

³ Article 11 *Staatsgrundgesetz* of 1867: „Das Petitionsrecht steht Jedermann zu“.

Actors and themes of PCIs

Today it is widely acknowledged that the “two worlds of inside (institutionalized, conventional) and outside (protest, unconventional) politics are not as neatly separated” (Kriesi 2015: 668). In this vein, studies pay attention to political players who “shift arenas in the search for new advantages” (Jaspers, 2015: 10). As such, petitions may be used by a broad variety of actors. While they are generally viewed as part of the repertoire of new social movements (Voss 2014), political parties may “capture” petitions as part of their mobilisation efforts, which may also be the case for parliamentary petitions or PCIs. In the case of Austria, the reform of parliamentary petitions in 1988 was driven by claims of new social movements for more direct involvement in parliamentary politics (Zögernitz 1989; Staudinger 1989). Thus, we expect PCIs to be proposed mostly by civil society actors, in particular by those who focus on issues surrounding new social movements, such as environmental and civil rights organisations. While these actors may have used PCIs throughout our period of analysis, their dominance may be particularly strong in the beginning, while more mainstream and established actors may have caught up in the usage of PCIs since then.

Since Petitions need to be submitted by MPs, we expect a dominance of MPs with closer ties to new social movements, in particular the Green party (Dachs 2006). As Halpin et al (2018) show on the example of petitions hosted on the global platform change.org, most petitions are actually directed at the government. We can thus expect that Petitions are rather submitted by members of parliament from opposition parties, and in terms of their content, that PCIs rather address government than parliament per se (for which PCIs are designed). If we understand PCIs as devices for raising political protest, the party affiliation per se should be of less importance than whether this party is part of the government or the opposition.

In terms of the key themes of PCIs, studies on petitions in other contexts find some commonalities, despite different timeframes and specificities of national political systems (Jungherr and Jürgens 2010; Miller 2009; Halpin *et al.* 2018): Miller (2009) reports that the most common issues addressed in petitions directed toward the Welsh and Scottish parliaments were about the national healthcare system, environmental issues, mobility/infrastructure and education policies. These topics are to some extent also identified by Halpin et al (2018) as usual petition themes, in addition to “Law, Crime and Family Issues”, which they find as the most common petition themes in Australia. For the case of the German Bundestag, Jungherr and Jürgens (2010) report that internet issues, civil and criminal law, taxation and social insurance are the most successful themes of petitions in terms of supporting signatures. Although there is a difference between most common themes and most successful ones,

their findings provide some contrast to the core themes of petitions as identified by Miller and Halpin et al.

We further distinguish between PCIs which aim to maintain the status quo and therefore are expression of political protest against policy reforms and PCIs which are proactive, calling for policy change. This distinction may correspond to the actors proposing a PCI: For new social movements it may be more likely that their PCIs demand policy change, while for PCIs from opposition actors, a PCI may be more likely to be of a reactive character, aiming to criticise government action. Since these actor categories are not mutually exclusive, there may be considerable diffusion also in terms of the proactive or reactive demands of PCIs.

Lastly, PCIs may also serve as instruments for MPs to keep ties to their electoral districts. In this sense, specifically MPs with a local mandate are expected to submit Petitions, while for MPs with a federal mandate this possible function of PCIs may be of less importance (with MPs with a regional mandate expected to be in-between these two MP categories).

3. Data and methods

The current analysis rests on a dataset covering all PCIs submitted to the lower chamber of Austrian Parliament from the XX to the XXV assembly, respectively from 01/1996 to 10/2017 (n=933). Since the coding process is ongoing, several variables were only coded for the period from 2011 to 2017 (n=441). PCIs were not selected randomly, but constitute a full inventory.

Actors involved in PCIs are coded by the organisational background of PCI proponent and – in case of petitions only – the characteristics of the MP submitting the petition (party membership and electoral district). Importantly, petitions can also be submitted by more than one MP, therefore the number of submitting MPs differs from the number of petitions and it will be interesting to see to which extent petitions are submitted together by MPs from different parties.

To assess the general and specific themes brought into the Parliament by PCIs the AUTNES coding scheme is applied (Kritzinger and et al 2017). The scheme offers 14 general categories (see Table 2) covering topics from infrastructure to welfare state related issues as well as infrastructural policies. With up to 10 sub-categories, the scheme offers a detailed specification of the topics raised by PCIs, which is used to interpret and then categorize the latter based on the texts submitted to the parliament by the initiators. To define whether an issue is reactive or proactive the same texts were analysed in terms of events, projects of enterprises, legal proposals or government actions. If the texts are found to be a reaction to one or similar occurrences, they are coded as reactive, if they bring an issue to the

parliament without specific extrinsic motivation they are considered proactive. Depending on the topic, PCIs can be exclusively local, regional or national as well as a combination of these different areas. For example, if a PCI proposes the change of laws on the national level, they are coded as national PCIs. However, if they aim for a change of local structures that are part of governmental of the parliament's competence PCIs can be local or regional as well as national. Moreover, requests initiated in single districts can affect the respective federal state as a whole, therefore it has to be considered local as well as regional. In order to clarify the character of a PCI, thus it being part of parliamentary or governmental competence, the addressees of the latter are observed. If an issue is directed exclusively towards the government or requires a specific action with no legal changes the respective PCI is coded as an executive demand. On the other hand, proposals for or requirements of legal actions as well as direct calls for action of the parliament are then coded as legislative demand. Lastly, we located the main proposition of PCIs on a two-dimensional political scale including an economic left/right dimension and a socio-cultural (GAL-TAN) dimension.

4. Empirical findings

The use of PCIs in Austria shows substantial fluctuations over time. While petitions were used only rarely until the policy reform of 1988 (about one petition every five months), since then petitions and citizens' initiatives have become a frequently used tool for addressing parliament. However, three periods are marked by a particularly intense use of PCIs: The XVII assembly, which can be interpreted as a consequence of the policy reform of 1988, when Citizens' Initiatives and a distinct parliamentary committee for PCIs were introduced. The XXI assembly, when the social-democratic SPÖ was in opposition and "discovered" PCIs as instrument to raise critique on the right-wing government; And the XXIV and XXV assemblies, when PCIs were used more extensively following the introduction of an opportunity to support PCIs on the parliament's website.

Table 1: PCIs in the lower chamber of Austrian Parliament

Assembly		Citizens' Initiative	Petition	PCIs total	
				Total	Per month
V.-XVI.	12/1945 - 12/1986	-	95	95	0.2
XVII.	12/1986 - 11/1990	23	86	109	2.3
XVIII.	11/1990 - 11/1994	105	95	200	4.2
XIX.	11/1994 - 01/1996	9	20	29	1.9
XX.	01/1996 - 10/1999	25	60	85	2.6
XXI.	10/1999 - 12/2002	30	102	132	3.5
XXII.	12/2002 - 10/2006	32	92	124	2.7
XXIII.	10/2006 - 10/2008	21	45	66	2.8
XIV.	10/2008 - 10/2013	74	220	294	4.9
XXV.	10/2013 - 10/2017	121	111	232	4.8

Total since XVII. assembly	432	825	1257
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(Blümel 2005; own calculation and extension)

Themes of PCIs

Table 2 gives an overview of the topics covered by PCIs during the time of 2011 – 2017 (n=441). The topics were coded following the AUTNES coding scheme as described above. The Table shows a dominance of infrastructure topics, followed by welfare state and general economic topics. The first category comprises road and rail traffic as well as energy supply and is predominantly initiated by regional actors. When it comes to energy supply, PCIs tackling infrastructural issues are also found to be a reactive instrument, that is expressing regional opinions about for example nuclear energy (as happened in January 2012 following the Fukushima catastrophe). Road and rail traffic on the other hand reflect concerns of regions about the maintenance and future service of railways, their connection to main routes of traffic or the improvement of regional road infrastructure. As can be seen in Table 2, the number of Petitions in this area is by far exceeding the one of Citizens' Initiatives, allowing the assumption that topics of the infrastructure category find support among MPs more easily than probably more polarizing issues.

Table 2: Policy areas covered by PCIs

	Citizens' Initiative	Petition	PCIs total
Infrastructure	11.3%	26.1%	20.2%
Welfare state	15.8%	17.0%	16.6%
Economy	15.8%	12.1%	13.6%
Education and culture	20.9%	8.3%	13.4%
Environmental protection	5.1%	13.3%	10.0%
Society	9.6%	3.8%	6.1%
Institutional reform	4.0%	6.8%	5.7%
Security	4.5%	5.7%	5.2%
Immigration	5.1%	1.9%	3.2%
Budget	1.7%	2.3%	2.0%
Europe	2.3%	1.9%	2.0%
Army	3.4%	0.4%	1.6%
Foreign policy	0.6%	0.4%	0.5%
Total	177	264	441

(n=441 PCIs since 2011)

Citizens' Initiatives appear to be most popular as instrument for participation when it comes to topics of education and culture. Initiatives in this area are started by pupils and/or their representatives as well as parents tackle financial equipment of schools as well as political education. Interestingly, these

PCIs do not (always) resemble party interests or positions but are of ‘neutral’ character in terms of a possible left-right categorization. This is not always the case, however, when PCIs express for example demands about welfare state issues. The difference between the two instruments is almost equal in this category. Again, regional concerns brought into the Parliament are often of ‘neutral’ character, exemplified by, among others, the assurance of regional health care and pharmaceuticals. National and probably more polarizing topics often tackle the issue of pensions, or in the category economy, liberalization of agriculture. Overall, the claims made in PCIs are significantly left-leaning, both on an economic and a socio-cultural cleavage (Table 3). A first tentative conclusion may be, that PCIs remain a regional instrument for participation, the issues and problems addressed by them, however, are of national concern as well and therefore require action at this level.

Table 3: PCIs in a two-dimensional political space

Socio-cultural cleavage	TAN	0.7%	3.6%	0.2%
	-	22.5%	33.0%	4.1%
	GAL	8.6%	26.4%	0.9%
		Left	-	Right
		Economic cleavage		

(n=441 PCIs since 2011, 1 missing value)

As outlined above, PCIs are often about issues of public infrastructure and agricultural/economic development. In these cases – but also in others – we can see a frequent use of PCIs used to raise protest against (alleged) policy reforms of the government. In quantitative terms, a slight majority of Petitions have therefore a reactive character, aiming to maintain the status quo. For Citizens’ Initiatives in contrast, almost 80 percent call for policy change (Table 4). Thus, the use of Citizens’ Initiatives (change) and Petitions (status quo) differs in this regard.

Table 4: Proactive and reactive positions in PCIs

	Citizens' Initiative	Petition	PCIs total
Proactive position	79.8%	54.2%	291
Reactive position	20.2%	45.8%	157
Total	188	260	448

(n=449 PCIs since 2011, 1 missing value)

These differences are also evident in the concrete measures asked for in PCIs: Although PCIs are generally designed to enable citizens to address parliament (Parlament 2015), more than half of the Citizens’ Initiatives actually call for some form of executive action by government. For Petitions, even 83 percent are directed towards the government instead of calling for legislative action. These differences underline the protest character of PCIs, in particular of Petitions.

Table 5: Executive or legislative demands in PCIs

	Citizens' Initiative	Petition	PCIs total
Executive demand	45.2%	83.3%	295
Legislative demand	54.8%	16.7%	136
Total	168	263	431

(n=441 PCIs since 2011, 10 missing values)

During the coding process several rather surprising findings about the general topics have been found. First, while topics such as immigration, anti-establishment sentiments or (anti-)EU topics are conceived more and more influential in Austrian politics and help to explain changes in the party landscape (Aichholzer *et al.* 2014) they do not seem to affect the instrument of PCIs for political participation to that extent. Here it appears that the latter are being used to bring regional and often non-polarizing issues on the national political agenda and thus evoke public attention. Second, although a tendency towards the right political spectrum can be observed in Austria (Dolezal 2005; Aichholzer *et al.* 2014), PCIs are indeed an instrument for topics on the left of this spectrum (Table 3). A third tentative assumption is concerned with the salience of the issues addressed by PCIs. The majority of topics may be of regional importance but not of special national interest. Nonetheless, highly salient issues on a national or European level appear to have a strong mobilizing effect on citizens to participate using instruments such as PCIs. Ciuk and Yost (2016) find evidence for the case of the USA that the salience of topics has an effect on the way citizens interact with parties for the acquisition of information, that is, the more salient an issue the less party-related information is acquired. For the case of Austria two of the most successful PCIs, the one of a parliamentary investigation following the Hypo-scandal in 2014 (25-10/P, 141,591 supporters; 25-8/P, 54,188 supporters) and the one of long term data preservation in 2011 (24-37/BI, 101,596 supporters), issue salience may be considered to be an explanatory factor when it comes to the success of instruments of political participation that go beyond party structures as well (Ciuk and Yost 2016: 341).

Proponents: Individuals, social movements, political elites

The proponents of PCIs as identified in the PCIs texts differ strongly between Citizens' Initiatives and Petitions.⁴ Citizens' Initiatives are mostly proposed by some form of civil society actors, which often are individual citizens (in 51 percent of all Citizens' Initiatives), non-governmental organisations or single-issue actors, typically referring to themselves as *Bürgerinitiative*, which are only loosely

⁴ In this view, the proponent of a PCIs differs from the person submitting the PCI; The latter are always individual citizens (for a Citizens' Initiative) or MPs (for a Petition). The actual proponent of a PCI and his or her organisational background may be mentioned in the submitted text and may include several actors within a single PCI.

organised and have the intention to advocate for a distinct issue. Established political actors, by contrast, make rather seldom use of Citizens' Initiatives (about 15 percent), but rather use ties to MPs to submit their propositions via Petitions. As such, about 57 percent of the proponents of Petitions from 2011 to 2017 were local political actors, mostly mayors or municipal councils. Individual citizens are only very rarely mentioned as Petition proponents. However, since 98 out of 264 Petitions do not include an actual proponent (where only the name of the submitting MP is mentioned), there is some uncertainty of the organisational origin of such Petitions: Is it the MP herself or himself who drafted the Petition? Is the respective political party? An answer to these questions is unfortunately beyond the scope of our data.

Table 6: Organisational background of PCI proponents

	Citizens' Initiative		Petition		PCIs total	
Local political actors	8	4,3%	94	56,6%	102	29,0%
Regional political actors	0	0,0%	3	1,8%	3	0,9%
Political party	6	3,2%	2	1,2%	8	2,3%
Professional associations (Kammern)	14	7,5%	13	7,8%	27	7,7%
Total political elites	28	15,1%	112	67,5%	140	39,8%
Individual citizens	95	51,1%	8	4,8%	103	29,3%
Single-issue civil society actors	23	12,4%	20	12,0%	43	12,2%
NGOs/NPOs/associations	38	20,4%	21	12,7%	59	16,8%
Total civil society actors	156	83,9%	49	29,5%	205	58,2%
Companies	1	0,5%	3	1,8%	4	1,1%
Other	1	0,5%	2	1,2%	3	0,9%
Total	186	100,0%	166	100,0%	352	100,0%

(n=441 PCIs since 2011, for 98 Petitions a proponent could not be identified; multiple organisations per PCI are possible)

MPs submitting petitions

As outlined above, PCIs tend to raise issues associated with economically left and socio-culturally liberal positions. This is also visible when looking at the party affiliation of MPs submitting petitions. As such, MPs from the Green party are generally speaking most active in submitting petitions, followed by the SPÖ. Table 7 displays the absolute numbers of petitions per party over the XX to the XXV assembly and shows how in total the SPÖ submitted by far the most petitions (351), followed by the ÖVP (202). However, when taking the relative size of these parties into account (as share of MPs in parliament), this picture changes significantly: Then, MPs from the Greens tend to be most active (XX, XXII, XXIV, XXV assembly), followed by the SPÖ (most active in XXI and XXIII assembly). The strong presence of the Greens can be understood on one hand as a consequence of their programmatic

emphasis on citizen participation (Dachs 2006) and on the other hand by their permanent opposition role in parliament. As such, the SPÖ made use of petitions in particular during their time in opposition (XXI and XXII assembly).

Out of 627 petitions submitted by MPs from the XX to the XXV assembly, 77 percent were submitted by a single MP, 15 percent by two MPs and eight percent by more than two MPs, with one petition, which was submitted by the entire ÖVP fraction. Within these 142 shared petitions, 63 percent were submitted by MPs from the same party, 19 percent by MPs from two parties and 18 percent from MPs of more than two parties. Hence, although it is not necessary, petitions are to a considerable extent used in cooperation with other MPs, including MPs from other parties.

This practice can be observed in particular from MPs with mandates from local and regional electoral districts (*Regionalwahlkreis* or *Landeswahlkreis*). Compared to MPs with a mandate from the federal electoral district, local and regional MPs use petitions much more frequently. In sum, 627 petitions were submitted by 938 MPs, of which 16 percent had a federal mandate, 43 percent had a regional mandate, and 41 percent had a local mandate.⁵ This corresponds well to the frequent local character of the contents of PCIs. However, controlling for the distribution of mandates from local, regional and federal electoral district(s), the use of petitions does not differ much for different types of mandates.⁶

⁵ More precisely, 938 names are listed as proponents of 627 petitions. Of course, many MPs submitted more than one petition, hence there are not 938 different MPs who have submitted a petition.

⁶ For instance, in the XXV assembly, 41 percent of all MPs had a local mandate, 38 percent a regional mandate and 21 percent a federal mandate.

Table 7: MPs submitting petitions by party family

	XX.		XXI.		XXII.		XXIII.		XXIV.		XXV.		XX.-XXV.
	Total	year/MP	Total	year/MP	Total	year/MP	Total	year/MP	Total	year/MP	Total	year/MP	Total
Social democrats (SPÖ)	43	0.15	111	0.54	81	0.29	35	0.26	58	0.20	23	0.11	351
Conservatives (ÖVP)	76	0.37	10	0.06	25	0.08	14	0.11	45	0.18	32	0.17	202
Far-right (FPÖ, BZÖ, TS)	20	0.12	14	0.08	15	0.21	7	0.13	84	0.31	44	0.22	184
Greens (Grüne)	16	0.44	15	0.34	27	0.40	8	0.19	87	0.87	31	0.32	184
Liberals (LiF, NEOS)	10	0.25	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	10	0.28	20
MEAN	33	0.27	37.5	0.26	37	0.24	16	0.17	68.5	0.39	28	0.22	188.2

Note: Multiple values per petition possible

5. Discussion and conclusion

As shown above, PCIs cover a vast range of issues and stem from individual citizens as well as from established, well-organised political elites. However, within this diversity, a great share of PCIs raise protest against government-initiated policy reform. As such, this protest typically takes positions of the political left and comes from local political actors. This form of protest is almost exclusively raised via Petitions, whereas Citizens' Initiatives are in practice mostly used by civil society actors bringing in new themes, often niche issues, which were not on the political agenda yet. In this vein, we find a broad variety of actors involved with PCIs, with individual citizens by most common as proponents of Citizens' Initiatives and local political actors as proponents of Petitions. Thus, differences in the design of these two instruments meet different actor constellations in practice.

More generally speaking, PCIs can be conceptualised as multi-purpose instruments for raising public concern, which can be used whenever there are no more specific instruments available (Riehm *et al.* 2013). In the case of the lower chamber of Austrian Parliament, PCIs first allow individual citizens to call for government action in the parliamentary area and therefore differ from Popular Initiatives (*Volksbegehren*), which have to include a concrete legislative proposal. PCIs even cover some form of public government oversight, as PCIs on the role of the government in the bankruptcy of Hypo-Alpe-Adria suggest. This function differs from calls for individual grievance – an acknowledged function of petitions in the literature – since it is about *collective* oversight. For individual grievance, an Ombudsman system (*Volksanwaltschaft*) was introduced in Austrian Parliament already in the 1970s, hence PCIs can remain for collective concerns (Korinek 1977).

Second, PCIs complement the otherwise weak representation of local and regional interests in Austrian parliament. While the upper chamber of Parliament is substantially constrained in its powers and organised rather along political cleavages than along regions (Ucakar and Gschiegl 2013), PCIs function as a channel to bring local and regional interests into parliament. In this vein, MPs with local or regional mandates can represent their constituents by submitting their initiatives as Petitions to parliament. This function is also often fulfilled by multi-party petitions, where MPs from the same region but with different affiliations submit Petitions together.

Third, PCIs bring novel views and issues to public deliberation in parliament. Therefore, PCIs complement the otherwise party-dominated parliamentary debates. Tellingly, the themes of PCIs differ strongly from publically salient and party-dominated themes, such as migration and migrant integration, or European integration. Instead, PCIs often focus on smaller issues, which can be transmitted by the Petitions Committee (*Petitionsausschuss*) to parliamentary committees specialised

in the respective policy area (*Fachausschuss*). However, the parliamentary proceedings following the submission of PCIs are beyond the scope of this paper and call for further inquiry.

6. References

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